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## [Linking Research with Military Women's Health and Wellbeing](#)

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By Capt. Jaqueline D. Rychnovsky, NC, USN, commanding officer, Naval Medical Research Center



Capt. Jacqueline Rychnovsky (right), commanding officer, Naval Medical Research Center (NMRC), and Cmdr. Abigail Yablonsky (left) from Naval Health Research Center (NHRC), at the Military Health System Research Symposium, August 15 – 18, 2016. (Photo by Naval Medical Research Center Public Affairs)

SILVER SPRING, Md. – The number of women in the military has steadily increased over the years, and in January of this year, Congress mandated that military women be afforded the same opportunities for combat assignment as men. As a result, women could be serving in some of the most austere environments.

It is imperative to ensure the health and wellbeing of these women who serve in the United States military. To do this, we must consider the potential physical and mental health challenges related to deployment to areas such as Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, and determine how those experiences impact the health and wellbeing of women in future combat assignments. We also need to consider the utilization trends of military women within the Military Health System.

The Military Women's Health Research Interest Group (MWHRIG) was formed eight years ago by four military nurses, representing all the military services, with the goal of ensuring the health and wellbeing of the women who serve in the United States military today. I am proud to be the original Navy Nurse Corps member, along with my Army and Air Force colleagues Col. (ret.) Lori Trego, AC, USA; Lt. Col. (ret.) Nancy Steele, AN, USA; and Lt. Col. Candy Wilson, USAF, NC. The membership in MWHRIG has expanded to over 60 from Women's Health, Nurse Midwifery, Family Medicine, Pediatrics, and academia.

The MWHRIG has come a long way, but it all started with that first step and that first project – a basic literature search of peer reviewed research publications between 2000 – 2010 with articles featuring military women's health issues and health care needs. The goal was to create a web-based searchable data base to promote awareness in the professional military community for military clinicians and leaders charged with making evidence-based decisions. It took a long time, and required much support from a variety of sources. This project was completed in March 2015, with a pending launch of a searchable database. Readers can easily access a copy of the technical report at <http://www.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA622646>. A follow up review of literature published from 2011 to 2015 is already underway, funded by the TriService Nursing Research program with Cmdr. Abigail Yablonsky from the Naval Health Research Center as the Principal Investigator.

Along the way, much has happened and the MWHRIG has many accomplishments to its credit. The MWHRIG went on to create a handbook, *Military Women's Health Researcher Guide*, now in its 6<sup>th</sup> version, which lists the MWHRIG members and subject matter experts, along with a list of publications relevant to military women's health research. The guide provides the connections between seasoned and aspiring researchers and subject

matters experts to begin collaborating on research areas of interest that support the missions of the services. A copy of the guide can be requested through the team's project coordinator, Megan Foradori, RN, MSN, who can be reached at [megan.foradori.ctr@usuhs.edu](mailto:megan.foradori.ctr@usuhs.edu).

Our successes continue to grow. MWHRIG members have presented or participated in various research, development, and collaborative forums such as the VA Women's Health Services Research Conference, July 2010; the Department of Defense Panel at the National Training Summit on Women Veterans, July 2011; the Women in the Military Service for America, October 2011; the first Women in Combat Symposium, April 2014; the Military Health System Research Symposium, August 2016; the Association of Military Surgeons of the United States Annual Meetings; and multiple national women's health conferences.

The WHRIG has contributed valuable data on military women's health issues to guide the initiatives of the U.S. Army Office of the Surgeon General's Women's Health Task Force and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs Women's Health Issues Working Group.

After completion of the current project, the group will focus on the identification of research gaps and research priorities for military women's health.

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